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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/ 21875
DOI URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/ 21875

RESEARCH ARTICLE

LONELINESS AND MENTAL HEALTH: LONG TERM PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS IN OLDER ADULTS

Lakshmi Raj R[1] and Kirthi F. Chapparamani[2]

1. Centre for Distance and Online Education Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru.
2. (Assistant Professor) Centre for Distance and Online Education Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru.

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History
Received: 21 July 2025
Final Accepted: 24 August 2025
Published: September 2025

Key words:-
loneliness, social isolation, older adults, depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, India, interventions.

Abstract

Chronic loneliness and social isolation are modifiable risk factors for late-life mental health. This article synthesises evidence from a systematic review (2000 2025; 3,212 records, 62 included: 28 longitudi nal, 20 cross-sectional, 9 qualitative, 5 trials) and a complementary survey (N = 100). Findings consistently linked loneliness with depression, anxiety, and faster cognitive decline, mediated by HPA-axis dysregulation, inflammation, maladaptive cognitions, sleep disturbance, and reduced stimulation. CBT and group-based programs had the strongest intervention evidence, while mindfulness and arts-based approaches showed variable but promising effects. In the survey, 46% scored high on loneliness, which correlated with greater depression (GDS), anxiety (GAD-7), and poorer cognition (MMSE); rural older women living alone were most vulnerable. Clinical and policy implications include routine screening, culturally adapted psychosocial support, social prescribing, and digital inclusion tailored for low-resource settings.

Introduction:-

Loneliness is increasingly recognized as a determinant of mental health among aging populations. Defined as the subjective perception of inadequate social connections, lonelinessis distinct from objective social isolation. Global estimates suggest 20–40% of older adultsexperience chronic loneliness. In India, the erosion of joint family systems and rising institutionalization have made elders vulnerable, with studies indicating over 30% prevalence. This study integrates international and Indian evidence to examine the long-term psychologicaleffects of loneliness.

Theoretical Framework:

This study adopts an integrated biopsychosocial framework drawing principally on three complementary models:

1. **Evolutionary/Adaptive Model of Loneliness (Cacioppo):** loneliness serves as an evolved signal motivating reconnection; chronic activation produces hypervigilance and maladaptive physiological stress responses.
2. **Cognitive Discrepancy Theory (Perlman & Peplau, 1981):** loneliness emerges when perceived social relationships fall short of expectations; this discrepancy drives negative social cognitions and withdrawal.

Corresponding Author:- Lakshmi Raj R
Address:-Centre for Distance and Online Education Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru.

3. **Stress-Vulnerability / Allostatic Load Framework:** chronic loneliness leads to HPA-axis dysregulation, systemic inflammation, and sleep disruption, linking psychosocial experiences to mood and cognitive outcomes.

These models guided the review's mechanistic focus (biological, psychological, behavioural) and informed interpretation of interventions that target cognition, stress physiology, or social engagement.

Methodology:-

Systematic review component:

- **Databases searched:** PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar (2000-2025).
- **Search strategy:** (loneliness OR social isolation) AND (mental health OR depression OR anxiety OR cognitive decline OR dementia) AND (older adults OR elderly OR aging population).
- **Inclusion criteria:** peer-reviewed articles (2000-2025), participants ≥60 years, psychological outcomes (depression/anxiety/cognitive decline), English language.
- **Selection & extraction:** Titles/abstracts screened; 218 full texts assessed; 62 studies included (28 longitudinal, 20 cross-sectional, 9 qualitative, 5 randomized/quasi-experimental). Data extraction by two reviewers; narrative synthesis used due to heterogeneity.

Primary survey component (N = 100):

- **Design:** cross-sectional questionnaire survey of older adults in urban and rural settings to complement the review.
- **Measures:** UCLA Loneliness Scale; Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS); Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7); Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE).
- **Sample:** 100 participants (urban + rural); details on sampling method were not specified in the report (gap noted below).

Ethics: the original project notes that any publication of the project requires prior written approval from the project guide and director; users should secure appropriate permissions before submission.

Results / Findings:-

Systematic review synthesis (selected outcomes):

- **Study yield:** 3,212 initial records - 62 studies included.
- **Patterns:** consistent evidence that loneliness predicts increased depressive and anxiety symptoms and is associated with faster cognitive decline; biological markers (cortisol, inflammatory cytokines) and sleep disruption were repeatedly implicated.
- **Intervention outcomes:** CBT and sustained group interventions consistently reduced perceived loneliness; mindfulness showed benefits for loneliness and inflammatory markers in small RCTs; technology-mediated interventions were effective where access and literacy permitted.

Survey results (N = 100) - key findings (from project data):

- **Prevalence distribution:** Loneliness - Low 34%, Moderate 20%, High 46%. Depression - Low 41%, Moderate 33%, High 26%. Anxiety - Low 39%, Moderate 28%, High 33%. (see Table 6 in the original project).
- **Correlations:** Higher UCLA loneliness scores associated with higher GDS and GAD-7 scores and lower MMSE scores (project reports positive correlations).
- **Subgroup means (selected):** women living alone in rural areas had the highest mean loneliness (UCLA = 50), mean GDS = 17, and mean GAD-7 = 14; urban women living alone showed similarly elevated scores (UCLA = 45). A full subgroup table (Table 1) is provided in the source project.

Note: sampling details (recruitment strategy, response rate) were not fully described in the report-this limits inference beyond the sample.

Discussion:-

This synthesis confirms that loneliness is a strong predictor of late-life depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline, explained by chronic stress activation (elevated cortisol, inflammation), sleep disruption, and maladaptive social cognitions. The survey highlights rural older women living alone as especially vulnerable, reflecting Indian studies

and the socio-cultural shifts of migration and weakening joint families. Intervention evidence points in two directions: CBT is most effective for addressing maladaptive social cognitions and reducing both loneliness and depressive symptoms, while community-based approaches, such as group activities, intergenerational engagement, and music therapy; strengthen social capital in collectivist settings. Technology-enabled strategies offer wider reach but depend on improving digital literacy before broad implementation in LMICs.

Implications:
Routine loneliness screening should be part of geriatric care, supported by a stepped-care model ranging from brief psychosocial support to CBT and community referral. Policy action must strengthen age-friendly infrastructure, social prescribing, and digital inclusion through training and affordable devices. Research priorities include culturally adapted RCTs and longitudinal studies on psychosocial–biological mechanisms.

Limitations:-

The survey's sampling and recruitment details are insufficient, reducing external validity. Wide variation in tools, interventions, and follow-up limits meta-analysis, while evidence from India and other LMICs remains scarce and vulnerable to publication bias. Ethical restrictions also require project guide approval before publishing or presenting derived work.

Future Research:
Future priorities are large multicentre RCTs of culturally tailored, multicomponent interventions, standardised and validated loneliness measures across LMICs, longitudinal studies linking psychosocial factors to biological and cognitive outcomes, and implementation research adapting social prescribing to resource-limited systems.

Conclusion:-

Loneliness in older adults is a pervasive and modifiable determinant of mental health deterioration, with strong evidence linking persistent loneliness to depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline across cultural contexts. Multimodal responses - combining cognitive-behavioural strategies, sustained community engagement, and policy initiatives for social inclusion and digital access - are recommended. For India and similar settings, family-oriented and community-based programs that are culturally congruent may provide high value. Before any formal journal submission, secure the required permissions noted in the original project document.

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